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ABSTRACT

This study examined both maternal and child interaction styles, focusing on the association between differences in maternal level and quality of involvement and the synchrony and affective quality of child interaction behaviors. The subjects were 55 mother-child dyads in which the children (ages 2-5) had been referred to a mental health center because of developmental and/or adjustment problems. Results indicated that the affective quality of maternal behavior was related to the level of synchrony shown by the child. Positive maternal behaviors (engage, structure, expand, hug, reward) were correlated with positive synchronous child behaviors (join, structure). Negative maternal behaviors (disrupt, restrict, tease, discourage, criticize, threat, scold, force, punish) were correlated with asynchronous child behaviors (direct, persist, ignore). The affective quality of maternal behavior was not related to either the child's sex or the mother's marital status. Overall, 35% of the mothers were identified as employing predominantly negative interaction strategies. Within this group, 74% were also identified as being highly controlling. Children of negative/controlling mothers showed much more behavior that terminated rather than maintained shared focus and activity. It is concluded that children of highly critical and discouraging mothers may adapt by tuning out. Children of depressed mothers who do not provide structure, limits, or stimulation may have difficulty accepting limits and reciprocity in other settings. (JDD)

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Interaction in High-Risk Dyads:

Maternal Affect and Child Synchrony

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Although many different terminologies have been used, there is general consensus among researchers on early mother-child interaction about the importance of maternal responsiveness and sensitivity to the child's moves toward autonomy. One promising approach to assessing maternal sensitivity in dyadic interaction has been the focus on maintenance of shared focus and synchrony (Rocissano, Slade & Lynch, 1987; Rocissano & Yatchmink, 1983). However, as Schile (1989) has noted, the coding for synchrony does not always capture the affective quality of the interaction. Although maternal synchrony has been conceptualized as supporting child autonomy, it is unclear that a high level of negative synchronous behavior will have that effect. In the data presented here, analysis of maternal responsiveness within a sample of mother-child dyads in which the children had been referred for psychobehavioral evaluations indicated that the mothers differed on two general dimensions: level of involvement (from high to low) and quality of involvement (from positive to negative) (Johnson, Klappersack & Cohen, 1989,March).

Recent work on mother-child interaction has suggested that rather than focusing on global relations between interaction and development, it is more productive to examine how specific domains of dyadic interaction are reflected in characteristics of the child's functioning (Vibbert & Bornstein, 1989). This point represents an integration of the developmental and the family

systems approach (Menuchin, 1974) which is particularly important in assessing child functioning. For many "abnormal" child behaviors may in fact be very normal developmental outcomes of atypical or distorted family process. The present study examined both maternal and child interaction styles, focusing on the association between differences in maternal level and quality of involvement and the synchrony and affective quality of child interaction behaviors.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 55 mother-child dyads in which the children had been referred to North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center, a mental health center in Nassau County, New York, between February, 1987 and September, 1988 for early childhood evaluations because of developmental and/or adjustment problems. All children evaluated during this time for whom complete data was available were included in the sample, yielding a group of 30 males and 25 females. The population was ethnically mixed, suburban, and predominantly middle class. The children were between 2.2 and 5.7 years old. 55% of the children came from two-parent households; 45% from single-parent households. All the mothers were high school graduates and many had at least some college training.

Procedure

The play session. The data reported here were gathered as part of the regular early childhood assessment procedure at the Center. Each assessment team consisted of a psychiatrist, a psychologist and a social worker; the assessment involved two visits, and then a meeting of the team with the parents to inform them of the findings and treatment recommendations. The father was videotaped in the playroom with the child during the first visit, the mother during the second. The procedure for both play sessions was the same. For the first ten minutes, the parent was instructed to have the child play with the wooden blocks. For the second ten minutes, the dyad was told they could play with anything in the playroom.

Coding of maternal responsiveness. Maternal behavior was coded with a time sampling procedure, using intervals of one minute. For each interval, all variables that applied were indicated. The coding variables were organized along four general dimensions:

1) an overall characterization of the play situation (ongoing parallel, ongoing cooperative, only child playing, only mother playing).

2) the nature of maternal participation (engage, structure, expand, discourage, disrupt, restrict, order, tease).

3) maternal discipline tactics (hug, reward, criticize, threat, scold, force, punish).

4) the mother's general approach to the child (teacher, playmate, observer; for each of these, the mother was also rated and +/- controller).

Coding was done by clinical psychologists who were not involved in the assessment procedure and had no prior knowledge of the cases. Inter-rater agreement of at least 80% was obtained for all coding categories on practice tapes before the coding for this project began. Monthly checks of inter-rater agreement were conducted throughout the coding period.

Coding of child responsiveness. Because the focus of the study was on profiles of maternal interaction style in relation to child synchrony and affect, the coding of child behavior was conducted as a frequency count of target behaviors. The target behaviors were divided into general categories of synchronous and asynchronous, with notations for affective quality within each, as summarized below.

Synchronous: join, structure, restrict, criticize.

Asynchronous: direct, persist, ignore.

Coding was done by a clinical psychologist and a graduate assistant, both of whom had no prior knowledge of the cases. The procedures for inter-rater agreement for the maternal coding were also followed for the child coding.

Results and Discussion

Is the affective quality of maternal responsiveness related to child responsiveness?

The data indicated that the affective quality of maternal behavior was related to the level of synchrony shown by the child. Positive maternal behaviors (engage, structure, expand, hug, reward) were correlated with positive synchronous child behaviors (join, structure) ($r=.34$, $p<.05$). Furthermore, negative maternal behaviors (disrupt, restrict, tease, discourage, criticize, threat, scold, force, punish) were correlated with asynchronous child behaviors (direct, persist, ignore) ($r=.29$, $p<.05$). The affective quality of maternal behavior was not related to either the child's sex or the mother's marital status.

Is the interaction style of some mothers predominantly negative?

Overall, 19 of the mothers (35%) were identified as employing predominantly negative interaction strategies; 11 were observed with sons, 8 with daughters. Within this group of negative mothers, 14 (74%) were also identified as being highly controlling; 9 were observed with sons, 5 with daughters. This combination of negative and controlling behaviors is particularly significant because it means that the mother's negative behavior was focused on the child's initiatives. Thus, the child had little opportunity to experience success; and the child's only chance of this was through avoiding interaction with the mother.

How did children of negative/controlling mothers interact?

Each child received two scores: the synchronous score (SS) reflected the total number of synchronous behaviors observed during the play session; the asynchronous score (AS), the total asynchronous. A correlated t-test for the entire sample indicated that overall, children's SSs were significantly higher than their ASs (means=10.69, 2.65, respectively, $t(55)=11.22$, $p<.0001$). However, the ASs of children of negative/controlling mothers were significantly higher than those of the rest of the sample (means=4.14, 2.15, respectively, $t(53)=2.31$, $p<.01$). Thus, in these dyads the children showed much more behavior that terminated rather than maintained shared focus and activity.

Conceptual and clinical implications. The impact of maternal affective quality on the child responsiveness (synchrony versus asynchrony) indicates that children who appear unresponsive may simply have learned that it is safer not to respond. Thus, the child of a highly critical and discouraging mother may adapt by tuning out. While this may be an effective strategy at home, it will be maladaptive for the child in other settings. In contrast, the child of a depressed mother who does not provide structure or limits or stimulation may adapt by initiating and directing most of their interaction (cf. Schile, 1989). It is quite likely that this child will have difficulty accepting limits and reciprocity in other settings, because of limited exposure to them. In both these

examples, the underlying theme is that the "child's problem" is really a family problem. In order to improve the developmental prospects for the child, the mother-child dyad must be helped to interact more constructively.